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Contra Costa to Move Ahead with Laura's Law Program in February

A new program from Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS) will allow the county to request court-appointed outpatient treatment for people with severe mental illness, in accordance with Laura's Law.

The 2002 state law allows counties to use the civil court system to supervise care for people with mental illness who meet specific legal criteria, which include a history of hospitalization or violence and of declining offered treatment.

The Contra Costa Board of Supervisors passed a plan to implement Laura's Law, which counties may voluntarily adopt, in 2015. The county's Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT) program begins Feb. 1.

AOT emphasizes voluntary participation, but includes a referral and hearing process for placing individuals in court-ordered treatment, developed in partnership with Contra Costa Superior Court, County Counsel and the Public Defender's Office.

BHS has hired Mental Health Systems, a nonprofit with experience running similar programs in San Diego County and elsewhere in California, to work with county clinicians in providing treatment to referred patients.

CCHS' Behavioral Health Services Division (BHS) and its partners will continue to work closely with providers, family and patient advocates and the county Mental Health Commission to ensure AOT is effective, fair and respectful to all involved, Director Cynthia Belon said.

"AOT is critical for community members whose mental health challenges put them or others at risk, and have not yet received the help they need," Belon said. "This program is a resource to break the cycle of repeated hospitalization or incarceration that many of our potential patients face."

Program participants collaborate with care providers to develop individualized treatment plans and receive 24-hour access to services. Services may include mental health treatment, medication, access to primary healthcare, substance abuse counseling, counseling regarding benefits and other resources, supportive housing, vocational rehabilitation and family member support.

Requests for an AOT referral come from immediate family members, mental health care providers or law enforcement. A team of specially trained clinicians evaluate all referral requests, and a care team will repeatedly attempt to communicate with a referred individual to encourage voluntary participation.

A referred individual who will not voluntarily participate may be summoned to a private civil hearing in Contra Costa Superior Court. BHS would present evidence from its evaluation and the court would also hear from the individual and their legal representation, provided by the Public Defender's Office.

After the hearing, the judge may order the referred individual to participate in the AOT program.

When fully implemented, the program will have capacity to deliver care to as many as 75 patients. The first year of the program will be funded with \$2.25 million in Mental Health Services Act funding and about \$400,000 from the county's General Fund.

For more information or updates regarding the AOT program, visit cchealth.org/bhs.

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